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Sociocultural Groundings of Battered Women's Entrapment in Abusive Marital Relationship in Ghana

Stephen Baffour Adjei

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Education and Communication Science, University of Education, Winneba, College of Technology Education, Kumasi, Ghana

ABSTRACT

While social psychological theorizations have contributed to our understanding of why battered women continue to remain in abusive intimate relationships, its apparent exclusive focus on individual victims' psychological orientation leaves little conceptual space for discovering the subtle ways by which social and cultural norms shape the stay/leave decisions of victims of spousal violence. Drawing upon discursive psychology, this study explores the sociocultural groundings of stay/leave decisions of battered women in Ghana. Semi-structured focus groups and personal interviews were conducted with 32 participants: 16 victims and 16 perpetrators from rural and urban Ghana. Discursive accounts of participants suggest that post-divorce social stigma, remarriage alternatives, and post-divorce child care, as well as privacy framing of marital abuse function in concert to influence battered women's entrapment in violent marital relationships. The article argues that, rather than individual psychological orientation, the decision to stay in or leave abusive marital relationships in Ghana is socioculturally and structurally grounded. To understand the highly complex nature of spousal violence, one must always go beyond the person and his or her psychological orientations, and seek the origin of battered women's entrapment also in the external conditions of life, and in the sociocultural and structural forms of human existence.

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Aggression in an intimate relationship is a disturbing global social phenomenon. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) estimates that, globally, almost one third (30%) of all women who have been in a relationship have been physically and/or sexually abused by their intimate partners. The report further reveals that as high as 38% of all femicidal killings (murders of women) occur in intimate relationships (WHO, 2013). Africa has the highest prevalence of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV), with approximately 37% of ever-partnered women having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives (WHO, 2013).

CONTACT Stephen Baffour Adjei stevoo24@yahoo.com Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Education and Communication Science, University of Education, Winneba, College of Technology Education, Kumasi, Ghana.

Ghanaian society is highly patriarchal and research reports in Ghana show that husband-perpetrated spousal abuse is quite a common form of punishing women and may be applied in the event of a woman's failure to ask for a husband's permission before embarking on certain ventures (Adomako-Ampofo & Boateng, 2007; Nukunya, 2003). A 1998 survey on domestic violence in Ghana indicated that one in every three women had suffered physical abuse by a current or most recent male intimate partner (Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999). The Women and Juvenile Unit of the Ghana Police Service (WAJU, now Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit [DOVVSU]) recorded 1,869 cases of marital abuse between January 1999 and December 2002 (Amoakohene, 2004). In the first quarter of 2002, the mass media in Ghana reported of 13 uxoricidal killings (husband-perpetrated spousal murder; (Spousal Killing, 2002). Between 2009 and 2010, the DOVVSU also recorded 14,428 and 12,316 cases of abuse against women, respectively (GhanaWeb, 2011).

Although abuse perpetrated by intimate partners violates most people's fundamental hopes and expectations for a close relationship (Arriaga & Capezza, 2011), victims of spousal abuse in Ghana and elsewhere continue to remain in violent marital relationships (Adjei, 2012; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). Research indicates that IPV victims continue to stay in violent relationships for various reasons, such as social stigma; victims' internalized sense of failure or self-blame, and external or partner-blame (Eckstein, 2011); feeling of shame, helplessness, and low self-esteem (Loke, Wan, & Hayter, 2012). Research suggests that women who justify wife beating in Ghana have higher odds of experiencing physical and sexual violence (Tenkorang, Owusu, Yeboah, & Bannerman, 2013). However, discourses both within and outside the family in Ghana suggest that when a woman is physically and/or sexually abused, it is not too unusual to warrant divorce (Adjei, 2015a). For instance, it has been observed that wife beating in Ghana may be considered by the extended family as "little" or "insignificant," which should not merit mention (Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). This may be because the family and the Ghanaian society generally look down upon divorce (Adinkrah, 2008), to the extent that some abused women prefer to remain in violent marital relationships to preserve their family image (see Adjei, 2015a). A report by the United Nations (UN, 2011) indicates that over 40% of Ghanaians think it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife. A similar survey report by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2011) reveals that as high as 60% of women and 36% of men believe it is justifiable for husbands to beat their wives in Ghana, with an acceptance rate of 70% and 51% for rural and urban women, respectively.

Despite a handful of extant legal and sociological research on the prevalence of abuse and victimization in Ghana (Adinkrah, 2012; Amoakohene, 2004; Bowman, 2003; Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994),

there is a dearth of psychologically informed perspective that examines the psychosocial and cultural accounts of battered women's entrapment in Ghana. The purpose of this study is to fill this void by drawing upon discursive psychology to explore the sociocultural accounts that shape the stay/leave decisions of victims of spousal abuse in Ghana. In the following sections, a few of the major psychological theorizations of entrapment are described as well as the communalist ontology of personhood in Ghana as theoretical considerations relevant for framing entrapment.

Social psychological theorization of entrapment

Psychologists have, over the years, suggested several theories to address the most frequently asked question of why battered women continue to stay in abusive intimate relationships. Most of these theories have victims' *commitment*—an individual's intent or resolve to keep a relationship and to remain psychologically attached to it—as the major determinant of entrapment (see Dare, Guadagno, & Muscanell, 2013; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). For example, the theory of cognitive dissonance, which exemplifies the principle of commitment and consistency, has been deployed to explain why some women remain with their abusive partners. Cognitive dissonance fundamentally suggests that accepting two opposing beliefs results in a cognitive discomfort that motivates a person to either alter one of the existing beliefs to be consistent with the other or reduce the importance of any one of the conflicting cognitions (Festinger, 1957). Consistent with cognitive dissonance, Arriaga and Capezza (2011) theorized that people who are less committed to their abusive partners might (because of the negative belief) create a sense of equilibrium by feeling more negative about the relationship. On the contrary, individuals who are more committed to their aggressive partners might be *cognitively* motivated to feel positive about the partner and thus adopt a less negative perception about the partner's abusive behavior (Arriaga & Capezza, 2011). In effect, highly committed victims of IPV may hold a tolerant view about abuse and remain in their relationships because of a psychological urge to reduce dissonance or the conflicting cognitions of high commitment and negative view about partner's abuse, in order not to give rise to feelings of uneasiness.

A similar commitment-dependent theorization has been suggested from an *investment model* perspective. Focusing on the situational, structural, and interdependence nature of relationships, Rusbult and Martz (1995) have proposed that stay/leave decisions of victims of IPV are moderated by three processes positively associated with *commitment* levels: satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. They suggest that high level of satisfaction, the extent to which an individual favorably evaluates a relationship, directly influences high commitment level and low satisfaction

level lowers commitment level. A high level of satisfaction has been observed as influencing stay/leave decisions of battered women (Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2011). Alternative quality, the attractiveness and availability of choices to relationship, is also noted as shaping commitment level in an unsatisfying relationship (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). The commitment of victims to an unsatisfying relationship is likely to be weaker when attractive alternatives are available to them than when there are none (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Thus, victims of IPV are more likely to exit abusive relationships when, for example, options such as a possibility of remarriage, social support from family and significant others, or individual skills and competencies that enhance alternative living exist. Conversely, when choices available to victims are limited and unappealing, or when there is a fear of the unknown future, abused partners are more likely to feel deeply committed to unsatisfying relationships and are less likely to leave (Pilkington, 2000).

The final commitment-related variable of the investment model is investment size, defined as "the number and magnitude of resources that are tied to the relationship" (Rusbult & Martz, 1995, p. 560). Direct investments, such as time; self-disclosure; emotional energy; and indirect investments like children, mutual friends, and shared possessions, are believed to enhance commitment level and thus decrease the likelihood of terminating abusive relationships. For example, commitment to an unsatisfying intimate relationship should be greater among victims who have been involved with their partners for relatively longer periods, among partners who are married rather than cohabitating or dating, and among women who have a greater number of children with their partners (Dare et al., 2013; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). The key assumption of the investment model is to de-emphasize research theorizations that focus on the battered individual's personal dispositions to explain stay/leave decisions of battered women.

A more recent theorization by Dare and colleagues (2013) draws upon Foot-in-the-Door effect and cognitive dissonance theory to argue that both *commitment* to an abuser and the motivation to maintain *consistency* between individuals' attitudes and actions can best explain why some women choose to remain in an abusive relationship. For example, they have theoretically proposed that, to want to maintain consistency with previous commitments, abused women's consistency in accepting minor abuse within a relationship may cause them to eventually remain in an unhealthy relationship. While these psychological and individualized frameworks contribute to our understanding of the complex social phenomenon of IPV and victimization, they leave little conceptual space for discovering the broader psychosocial and sociocultural accounts of stay/leave decisions of battered women. Its one-sided focus on victims' psychological orientation (e.g., commitment and the need for cognitive consistency) leaves victims' entrapment analysis and stay/leave decisions at the personal rather than at the structural

level of society in which they are embedded. As stated earlier, this study draws on the social representations of communal life in Ghana to develop a framework in which battered women's entrapment could also be understood from social conditions and dominant cultural discourses of society.

Communalist positioning of personhood in Ghana

Ghanaian society is socially organized and generally communal (Adjei, 2015b). Gyekye (1996) defines the concept of communalism as "the doctrine or theory that the community (or, group) is the focus of the activities of the individual members of society" (p. 36). People within the social context of Ghana generally express their sense of self (personhood) in relation to their community and this communal self-positioning gives form and direction to thought and social behavior. The doctrine of communalism provides insight into the Ghanaian view of personhood (the fact of being a person, having those qualities that confer distinct individuality) as basically social and normative (Adjei, 2015b). Thus, personhood in Ghana is relational, connected to pre-existing social forces by default of existence (Adams & Dzokoto, 2003). The communalist understanding of personhood is based on the idea that identity of the individual is never separable from the sociocultural environment. In the communalist ontology of self, individuals exist as persons, as members of a group, and as members of a community; all of which are constantly interacting and inter-penetrating one another. Thus, identity in this context is constructed in and at least partially by a set of shared beliefs, patterns of behavior, and expectations. Personhood in the Ghanaian society is thus a *becoming* rather than *being* (existence); something which must be attained and not granted simply because one is born human.

Although one can find traces of individual autonomy in the African context, the notion of an individual as not normatively shaped by the community to which he belongs does not make sense in many African cultures including Ghana (Menkiti, 1984). Identity, in these contexts, is typically defined in terms of how others, be they individuals or groups, influence the person (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). The communal orientation of persons in Ghana prime them to be more concerned about others approval because of the logic that a person's identity and self-worth is socially conferred or denied (Adjei, 2016). The communal feature of the Ghanaian cultural and moral life has important implications for the study of battered women's stay/leave decisions in abusive marriages. For example, Adjei (2015a) observes that battered women's commitment to self-expression may be subjugated to the social and family order in Ghana. It has also been reported that participants' relationality or objective self-awareness—the tendency for individuals to feel that they are under intense social

evaluative scrutiny by others—has considerable negative implications for interpersonal relationships in Ghana (Adams, 2005).

Although context is a far more important consideration than consistency in social behavior in Ghana, this study does not assume that the communal life in Ghana is absolute and overarching cultural orientation that converts all members of the Ghanaian society into automatons of social compliance, completely under the influence of 'otherness.' The fact is that people in Ghana and elsewhere participate and construct practices common to their environment differently; however, they do so through culturally familiar social discourses. Thus, battered women's agentive positioning and behavioral choices in abusive relationships may be grounded in their *relationality* and public self-consciousness.

Method

Discursive psychology

The present study draws insights from the theory and methods of discursive psychology, which involves the application of ideas from discourse analysis to the study of social phenomena in psychology ((Potter, 2003; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourse analysis is both a method of conceptualizing and analyzing language (McMullen, 2011) and provides a systematic framework for the analysis of interviews and interactional data (Seymour-Smith, Wetherell, & Phoenix, 2002). Discursive psychology generally studies the flow of meaning making and what shapes it (Hodge & Kress, 1988), and pays attention to *action orientation* of talk; that is, how participants in social interactions use discursive resources to achieve a certain effect (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013).

Thus, the emphasis is not on whether or not what people say is 'true' but rather on understanding how certain 'realities' are produced and presented as 'true' (Wetherell, 1998). The 'truth' about a given psychological phenomenon is not given by individual participants in a social discourse but effected through the lenses of their given context because participants in a social interaction are both producers and products of culture within their social environment (Adjei, 2013). Culture, in this view, is not fixed but considered as patterns of representations or actions that are distributed by and constructed through social interactions (see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). Central to discursive psychology is the concept of *interpretative repertoire*, that is, terminologies, stylistics and grammatical features, preferred metaphors and figures of speech, and general commonsensical ways used by members of a given community to characterize and evaluate actions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discursive psychology also emphasizes the dialectic relationship in which social realities and subjectivities are constituted historically, politically,

and socially at a macro level (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Talk about a social issue such as battered women's entrapment is organized as social action in its immediate context, and around culturally familiar interpretive resources that reveal the shared meaning-making processes of participants within a given broader social and historical context (see Edley & Wetherell, 2001). The signature feature of discourse analysis is its flexibility and reflexivity, where historical and sociocultural experiences of both researchers and participants shape and direct data interpretation and analysis (Adjei, 2013).

Study location and participants

The rural sites for this study were in the Ashanti region while the urban sites were suburbs in Kumasi (Ashanti region) and the capital Accra (the greater Accra region) of Ghana. The total number of participants was 32 adults comprising 16 perpetrators (men) and 16 victims (women). The age of participants ranged from 24 to 60, with between four to 22 years of marriage. The majority of participants (n = 25) were Akans (the largest ethnic group in Ghana), and the remaining were Ewes (n = 2), Ga-Adangbe (n = 1), Dagomba (n = 1), and unknown (n = 3). Over 81% of the participants were Christians (n = 26), and the rest were Muslims (n = 4) and unknown (n = 2). The participants were mostly farmers (n = 11); and the rest were petty traders (n = 7), commercial drivers (n = 6), hairdressers (n = 4), and teachers (n = 4). While Accra and Kumasi, the urban sites, are characterized by heterogeneity, weakened family bond, and traditional values due mainly to urbanization and social change (Nukunya, 2003), the rural areas of Ghana largely consist of indigenous homogenous ethnic groups with deeply entrenched traditional norms and values.

Design and procedure

The data for the present study was obtained through semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth individual interviews conducted with 32 participants in Ghana over a period of 7 months, beginning from January to July 2014. Participants were sampled through home and community visits, contact with the DOVVSU, and other snowballing contacts. The purpose of the study was introduced to officials of DOVVSU and community/opinion leaders who usually settle cases of spousal violence. They, in turn, assisted in identifying potential participants to seek their consent. Additional recruitments were made through snowballing contacts provided by recruited participants. The DOVVSU, created by an Act of Parliament (Act 732) in 2007, is a specialized unit of the Ghana Police Service responsible for preventing crimes against women and children, and to particularly provide them with protection from domestic violence. Contact with the DOVVSU and

community/opinion leaders ensured the recruitment of participants with richer knowledge and insights into the phenomenon of spousal violence.

The purpose of the study was explained to all prospective participants and they were informed that their participation and/or answering of questions was voluntary. The inclusion criteria were women with (self-reported) experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse from a current or past marital partner and men who had inflicted physical and/or sexual abuse on a current or past partner. These criteria were considered relevant because, regardless of how one explains violence in intimate relationships, the perspectives one offers may remain irrelevant to those who experience it (DeKeresdy & MacLeod, 1997).

A semi-structured interview guide was used for both the focus group and personal interviews, which included topics such as participants' description of themselves and their marriage; their general views about husband-to-wife abuse; whether or not spousal violence was normal; abuse and divorce; help-seeking; and family interventions. A total of four FGDs were held, two each for rural and urban victims and perpetrators; six all perpetrators (men) group and six all victims (women) group in each case. Single sex FGD allows discussants to share their views honestly without any inhibition from members of the group (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Putting males and females in a mixed group in a hierarchical society of Ghana would hinder women from freely expressing their views—they may have been overshadowed by their male counterparts because of power imbalances (Adjei, 2012). Eight additional in-depth personal interviews were conducted with victims and perpetrators (different from FGD participants) from rural and urban settings to help triangulate issues and patterns. In order not to compromise the safety of victims, only one member was selected from the same marriage/household (either the husband or the wife) as a participant in the study.

For purposes of confidentiality, analysis, and reporting, codes were adopted for FGD participants to reflect their status, interview site, and ordinal position. For example, RV1 and UV1 represented rural victim number one and urban victim number one, respectively. Interviews were conducted in *Twi*, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language belonging to the Akans. The use of *Twi* created a relative power balance between the researcher (a native speaker of Twi) and the participants on one hand, and among participants on another. All FGDs lasted between 45 and 60 minutes while individual interviews lasted between 25 and 35 minutes. Interviews were held at convenient locations selected by participants, audio-recorded with the consent of participants, and later transcribed into English by the researcher. Interview transcription emphasized readability rather than details of Jeffersonian notation that indicates pitch, prosody, timing, and pauses (LeCourteur & Oxlad, 2011).

Data analysis

The analysis of data in the present study focused on the 'action orientation of talk' (Edwards & Potter, 1992), that is, attention was paid to how a participant deployed discursive resources to achieve certain effects. The author carefully and iteratively listened to recordings (in Twi) with intermittent back and forth movement to obtain clarity and familiarity with the data. The greater part of the interviews was then translated and transcribed from Twi into English for purposes of conceptual formulations and reporting. However, the author stayed in the source language (Twi) as long and as much as possible through repeated listening of audio recordings to avoid potential meaning losses and translation limitations. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 10 for inclusive coding; that is, searching and grouping of extracts related to the overall focus of the study (Potter, 2003). Different words or phrases that were repeatedly used and pointed to the regularity and patterns of participants' discursive orientation were assigned to data chunk. Such groups included participants' construction of their agency in negotiating stay/leave decisions, cultural framing of husband-to-wife abuse, family intervention and support, help-seeking behavior, social norms about marriage and divorce, and gender identity discourses, among others.

The selection of extracts for analysis then became focused based on the context of what was said, how participants said it (e.g., their choice of words), and why they may have said it. In line with the purpose of the study, the assembled discursive patterns were further pruned down and/or merged. The emerged discursive patterns and concepts were then formulated and interpreted in view of participants' contextual features, such as history, values, beliefs, and culture. Selected extracts and the author's interpretations of them were presented to two other research colleagues to engage with and subject the data to thorough and careful evaluations in relation to the overall aim of the study. Discussions from meetings the author had with them provided valuable insights and credibility to the analytical processes of data as it helped in developing *intersubjective consensus* on both selected data and its interpretations. Beyond participants' immediate discursive practices and negotiation of meaning in the interviews, the analysis also attended to the broader social and institutional contexts of gender relations and marriage in Ghana, as well as communalist orientations and social-positioning that shapes participants' discursive deployments. Examples of extracts from interview transcripts alongside interpretations that have been made of them are presented below. These examples were chosen because they provide clear and inclusive illustrations of the major ways in which participants talked about battered women's entrapment (see Walker & Goodman, 2015).

Findings

Discursive accounts of participants revealed three main psychosocial and cultural factors as influencing battered women's decision to stay in or leave abusive marital relationships in Ghana: (1) social stigma of divorce, (2) remarriage possibilities and post-divorce child maintenance, and (3) washing dirty linen in public: Cultural framing of marital abuse as private.

Social stigma of divorce

Accounts of participants associated battered women's anxiety over post-divorce social stigma with their entrapment in abusive marriage in Ghana. Participants positioned divorce as a social anathema to both women and their lineage/family of orientation (i.e., '*abusua*') in Ghana. For example,

> I am not happy with him; I always live in fear so how can I be happy in this relationship. I still live with him because when you are divorced in this community, people will talk about you; people will discuss you and cast insinuations to suggest that you have a bad character that's why your husband has divorced you. (Rural victim, personal communication)

The victim in the quote above expresses her 'double fear'—the fear of abuse and the fear of divorce-induced community "insinuations" and condemnation. However, the greater fear, it seems, is her fear of divorce and the extent of social humiliation that divorced women must bear in the Ghanaian community. It appears that rather than a result of husband-perpetrated abuse, society generally interprets divorce as a consequence of a woman's (divorcee's) poor moral integrity and character flaws; ostensibly extricating perpetrators from their abusive behavior. The quote highlights victims' enduring attention to the self as object of other people's attention and social evaluative scrutiny. Despite their fears of abuse, it appears that the shame and embarrassment that battered women often feel about the insinuations of social others prevents them from leaving their abusive partners. As is evident in the quote above, the victim's aversion to divorce is linked with her objective awareness of relational others and the unpleasant interpersonal social evaluations that divorcees are likely to receive from society. Thus, it seems that victims of spousal abuse adjust their own behavior and continue to stay in abusive relationships to avoid stigmatization. The quote further indicates the heavy social, cultural, and moral obligations of women in Ghana to keep their marital relationships as their self-esteem and social image seem to be intricately associated with their ability to keep their marriages.

Participants' discourses also suggested that women are more likely than men to be blamed for divorce in Ghana.

> It is difficult to be divorced in this community. You always become the talk of town and people say all manner of things about you. Nobody will say I left because my husband abused me. They will insinuate and laugh at me … maybe he will change. (Urban victim, personal communication)

It is suggested in the quote that people may impugn ill motives and "say all manner of things" including insinuations bothering on divorcees' moral standing in society. It is emphasized that stay/leave decisions of battered women in Ghana rest on what personal choice of action might mean to women's public self-image in the community. To escape this staggering burden of '*integrity scrutinization*' and its concomitant social insinuations and mockery, abused women may feel psychologically pressured to continue to stay in unsatisfactory marital relationships. The awareness of real or imagined social audience and human watchers heightens the public reputational concerns of victims of abuse and influences them to stay as they adjust their behavior to suit the family and social audience. It can thus be said that the decision by victims of spousal abuse to remain in abusive marital relationship in Ghana may be an adaptive response to their intense public self-image and fear of post-divorce stigmatization.

Discursive accounts of participants also associated divorce with family dishonor and collective embarrassment. For instance, in a focus group interview, one victim indicated that:

> I reported my husband to the police but my family advised me to withdraw the case. They reminded me that two of my relatives were divorced by their husbands and so it is not a good thing for me to add to the number because it will tarnish the image of the family. (Urban victim 5, FGD)

The discourse above clearly evinces a familial preference for amicable settlement of marital dispute to divorce, as the family perceives divorce to be potentially discrediting to family prestige and honor. It is further implied in the quote that the more divorce a family records, the more tainted the family image appears in the eyes of social others. It is thus suggested that families with a history of divorce may suffer collateral social damage as future suitors might not want to choose from the family. These discursive accounts emphasize the social and historical significance of the extended family in Ghana and its apparent precedence over individual rights and choices. It further emphasizes the fact that, in the communal morality of Ghana, the ethics of responsibility towards the family is placed high and above ethics of individual rights. Apparently, compared with individual happiness and freedom, the greater call and moral responsibility for most women in the Ghanaian society may be to preserve and protect the social order and the family image. As can be seen in the quote above, family image and identity appears to be deemed tarnished through acts of divorce or unsuccessful marriage of women than through acts of spousal violence. These discursive

deployments provide evidence for emphasis on the influence of the extended family in the marital life of women in Ghana with a subordinated emphasis on the self and personal choice.

Opportunity for remarriage and post-divorce child maintenance

Participants constructed possibilities for remarriage as one of the key socio-cultural factors that influence stay/leave decisions of battered women. There appears to be a relationship between divorce stigma and remarriage possibilities as recounted by participants.

> I didn't report him earlier because I was afraid no one will marry me if he ended the relationship […] I am doing it now because I cannot bear the violence any more. Even if I don't get another man because I am a divorcee, I will prefer that to the current unhappiness in my marriage. (Urban victim, personal communication)

As can be seen in the quote, divorce-associated stigma has a carry-over effect for divorced women in the Ghanaian community. The victim suggests that divorce, apart from its associated social and psychological cost, also makes future remarriage alternatives unappealing and possibly unavailable for women. Thus, the decision of victims of partner abuse to remain in their abusive marital relationship in Ghana may be a function of perceived unappealing post-divorce remarriage choices that result from the stigmatization of divorcees.

Participants also constructed post-divorce child maintenance as another structural factor that constrains victims of spousal abuse in Ghana from fleeing violent marital relationships.

> It's not about happiness my brother (directed at researcher). It is more about where I will go with my four children and who will take care of them. Yes, I can leave today but I must equally be prepared to take care of the children because he will not do it. (Rural victim 3, FGD)

Although the victim acknowledges and constructs the abusive behavior of her husband as negative and unjustifiable, she feels stuck and helpless because of her children. She suggests that the husband may refuse to shoulder any responsibility for the children if she terminates the relationship. Her fear appears consistent with a common belief in most communities in Ghana that suggests that if a woman initiates divorce proceedings and subsequently quits her marriage, and there are children born into the wedlock, the divorced men may derelict all parental responsibilities and abandon the children. Apparently, fathers may neglect their parental duties as a form of angry protest against the decision of women who by themselves initiate and leave unsatisfactory relationships. Some fathers too may refuse to stay with the children, even if they are old enough, in order to make the

divorcee's remarriage opportunities slim and unappealing. It thus seems that battered women's anxiety over the unknown future for their children appears to be informed by the experiences of divorcees in the Ghanaian community. Apparently, the more children a victim has with a perpetrator, the less likely the perpetrator would worry about a victim's decision to end the relationship.

As one perpetrator indicated; "she can quit for all I care […] after all who in this village will marry a divorcee with five children" (Rural perpetrator 2, FGD). Rather than worry about his violent behavior, the perpetrator seems unperturbed, apparently due to the belief that "no person will marry a divorcee with five children." This belief may embolden and motivate perpetrators to persist in their violent actions without fear of losing their partners. It can be argued that the more children a woman has, from a current or past relationship, the less likely it is for her to find another man to remarry after divorce, and the more likely she may be compelled to continue with the abusive relationship.

Washing a dirty linen in public: Cultural framing of marital abuse as private

Contrary to the communal value system in Ghana, participants positioned marital abuse as a "private matter," which cannot be shared by all. The accounts revealed that when abuse occurs, it is culturally framed and generally regarded as belonging to the private realm of the two people involved in the relationship dyad.

> Sometimes I had to hide my bruises from my friends and the public or give excuses if I can't hide them because I did not want people to know what was happening in my marriage. That is not the best thing for a woman to do; reporting every single case in your marriage to others […] there is problem with every marriage. I would rather tell my family. (Rural victim, personal communication)

Experience of marital abuse is culturally positioned and represented in the above quote as restricted to the private sphere of individuals involved, and perhaps their families ("I would rather tell my family"). The unwritten sociocultural norm or the moral rule of "*privacy of marital issues*" in Ghana is very pervasive, to the extent that when physical abuse occurs, victims prefer to use excuses of personal responsibility for bruises and wounds. As pointed out above, victims may feel uncomfortable publicly talking about their painful ordeals in marriage "to others." They would rather adjust their own behavior to conform to norms of marriage than to report abuse to others or seek external or professional assistance outside the extended family. The sanctity and precedence of collective ethics (ethics of extended family and social others) over individual rights and privileges preclude women from seeking help outside the immediate nexus of the extended family. For example:

> That is very true […] the media only report when someone is killed or when a woman cheats on her husband. If a woman cheats on her husband, then everybody will talk about it and say it is bad and all that […] Even if you complain, people will tell you that you don't have to wash your dirty linen in public; marital matters must remain in the bedroom and so many things. (Rural victim 6, FGD)

The quote emphasizes the depth of the norm of "privacy" by pointing out the selective treatment of marital issues by the Ghanaian media and the public. The victim appears to stress that besides death or a woman's adulterous conduct, other issues in marriage, including marital abuse, are not treated as urgent by the media because it is regarded as a private matter. The victim's account further implies that the unpleasant ("dirty linen") aspects of marriage, including wife abuse, should not be brought to or "*washed in*" the full glare of the public because of its potential to damage the identity and social image of the actors involved (man, wife, and extended family) and the marriage institution in general. For this reason, victims may be psychologically motivated to keep incidents of abuse, especially sexual abuse, to themselves; avoid "*complaining*" or seeking public help (including reporting to the police); and suffer from suppressed emotional pain alone—all to escape social stigma. It appears that many victims tolerate and remain in abusive conjugal relationships and do not publicly report even particularly disturbing instances of abuse because of the perception that spousal conflicts are "private" in the Ghanaian communal ethos.

However, some participants indicated that the cultural norm of "*privacy of marriage*" can be both accepted and contested by victims of spousal abuse in Ghana, as exemplified by the following account:

> My view is that men should stop abusing us because if they continue to do that we will also report them. I know it is not the best thing to do and people might say that I am discussing marital issues in public or reporting my own husband but I will not let my husband kill me because of a marriage. No I will not sit down at all. (Urban victim 4, FGD)

The above response suggests how individual victims can defy and resist beliefs imposed by society. The victim demonstrates that despite the embeddedness of collective meaning systems, personal meaning processes of individual victims can be employed to reassert personal control of life and shape experiences in marriage in Ghana. Nonetheless, in the light of the discourse, "I know it is not the best thing to do and people might say that I am discussing marital issues in public or reporting my own husband," the victim effectively highlights how her resistance to norms of "*marital privacy*" may incite public condemnation and stigmatization. It is evident that when the collective norm of privacy must be subordinated to personal choice and action, it could create social fracture and even personal discomfort. Thus, her anticipation of negative social evaluations and criticism illustrates the

social cost of publicly reporting marital abuse in Ghana. To ensure the smooth running of the social order, victims of spousal abuse in Ghana may be culturally expected to sacrifice their agency, the belief in the self and the power to change the course of history, and individuality on the altar of tradition and norms of marriage. This "privatized" norm of marital abuse may psychologically influence victims to remain in abusive relationships and enable perpetrators to escape critical social scrutiny and legal punishment.

Discussion

In this article, the author explored social and cultural groundings of stay/leave decisions of victims of spousal abuse in Ghana. Discursive accounts of participants in the study have shown that post-divorce social stigma, remarriage alternatives, and post-divorce child care, as well as privacy framing of marital abuse function in concert to influence battered women's decision to stay in or leave violent marital relationships. As a social construction, stigma is determined by dominant cultural discourses (Mill, Edwards, Jackson, MacLean, & Chaw-Kant, 2010), which attribute damaging labels to persons who are perceived to have failed to uphold prevailing social norms and expectations in a given social context (Eckstein, 2016). Experience of post-divorce stigmatization in Ghana is socially driven such that acceptance of divorcees into society and groups (e.g., church) may be socially demeaned (Asante, Osafo, & Nyamekye, 2014). Consistent with the communal ontology of personhood, victims of spousal abuse in Ghana appear to have intense anxiety and dysphoria about post-divorce negative social evaluation and public humiliation. They tend to be more concerned about others approval because of the logic that a person's identity and self-worth is socially conferred or denied (see Adjei, 2016). As previous studies point out, the stigma associated with battered women has a powerful influence on their sense of selves, their sense of their own power, and, ultimately, on their behavioral choices (Semaan, 2004).

Post-divorce stigma in Ghana can be so extreme that divorcees may feel regretful for having initiated and divorced their husbands (Asante et al., 2014). The social stigma of divorce in Ghana may be particularly influential in battered women's stay/leave actions because people in Ghana generally have a more enduring attention to the self as an object of other people's attention and social evaluative scrutiny (see Adams, 2005). Similarly, research in an interdependent society of Hong Kong observed that abused women continued to stay in abusive relationships to avoid being looked down upon or socially stigmatized by others in society (Loke et al., 2012). The thought of divorce as a potential act that could incite community evaluation and condemnation appears to keep abused women in violent conjugal relationships in Ghana. Given the fact that stigma potentially threatens the identity, social

status, general psychological well-being, and physical health of the stigmatized (Eckstein, 2016; Major & O'Brien, 2005), it seems reasonable that victims of spousal violence in Ghana and elsewhere (see Loke et al., 2012) will stay in abusive relationships for fear of post-divorce communal censure and social stigma.

It has also been shown that battered women may stay in abusive marriages to protect the image of their family against divorce-related social stigma. Family stigma is considered a *social injury* in Ghana and potentially damaging to the social reputation of a family (Osafo, Hjelmeland, Akotia, & Knizek, 2011), including endangering the chances and expectations of both men and women in the affected family for marriage (Adinkrah, 2008). The family in sub-Saharan Africa is regarded to be prior to every individual in the community and a woman's status is a derivative one—her identity and status are defined by and inseparably connected to her family (Bowman, 2003). In much the same way as individual victims, the family also has a sense of public self-consciousness because it is a unit of societal attention and evaluation. In this view, the family and individual victims might prefer the lesser of two evils; they might prefer the evil of individual psychological and physical pain of abuse to save the family from the collective pain of divorce-motivated social stigma. For example, research reports in Ghana indicate that even when victims of abuse attempt to circumvent the traditional system by reporting IPV cases to the criminal justice system, the family and elders of the community often sought to withdraw these cases on their own initiative, with or without the victim's consent (Cantalupo, Martin, Pak, & Shin, 2006). Divorce-motivated stigma may induce fear, depression, and unhappiness, and apparently influence the decision of victims to stay in violent conjugal unions in Ghana. Divorce in Ghana is culturally frowned upon by individuals and families (Adinkrah, 2008), and any action on the part of a victim that may necessitate divorce could be equally detestable. Apparently, the public self-consciousness of victims and their desire to avoid the social stigma attached by the Ghanaian society to divorce (and to guard the self and their family against public evaluative scrutiny in Ghana) serves as a potential restraint to fleeing abusive marital unions.

The study further showed that post-divorce stigma has a knock-on effect on battered women's remarriage alternatives and possibilities. Discursive accounts of participants suggest that remarriage opportunities for divorced women may be blurred due to the stigma associated with divorce in the Ghanaian society. In addition to the norm that divorce is generally frowned upon; remarriage in Ghana is more common for men than for divorced women (Adinkrah, 2008). Consequently, battered women's stay/leave actions may be influenced by whether there are attractive post-divorce remarriage alternatives to them. The current finding meshes well with the social psychological proposition that availability and attractiveness of post-divorce

alternatives shapes the decision to remain or leave abusive relationships (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). If a victim of husband-perpetrated abuse has no better alternative, it is understandable that she might feel motivated to remain in an even very unsatisfactory relationship (Langley & Levy, 1977).

Another related structural factor that influences battered women's stay/leave decisions is post-divorce child maintenance. The tendency for divorced men in Ghana to neglect their parental responsibilities toward their children upon divorce is well documented (UNICEF-Ghana, 2000). Both legal and anecdotal evidence suggest that fathers in Ghana generally refuse outright to meet their responsibilities toward their children after divorce particularly if custody arrangements upon divorce fail to give custody of children below a certain age to the father (Britwum et al., 2004). Though unhappy, the post-divorce behavior of fathers in Ghana regarding child neglect may occupy the consciousness of victims of spousal abuse and thus influence their decision to remain in an unsatisfactory marital relationship. In her pioneering study in Ghana, Ofei-Aboagye (1994) pointed out that, although some women who had suffered husband-perpetrated abuse acknowledged that the physical abuse was serious enough to warrant some action against the perpetrators (such as leaving them), the victims reported that they had never contemplated taking any such measures because they either did not want their children to have different fathers or they would not have the wherewithal to keep the children in the comfort to which they were accustomed. In their recent study, Asante and colleagues (2014) observed that motherhood state in Ghana may serve as a strong demotivator for initiating divorce, to the extent that mothers who divorced their partners were stigmatized and labeled as insensitive to the plight of the children born into the wedlock. This is consistent with Rusbult and Martz's (1995) theorization that the size of investment (e.g., number of children) in a relationship could be a significant mediating factor in the leave or stay calculus of victims of partner aggression. A more recent study in Hong Kong also revealed that abused women remained trapped in abusive relationships and endured intimate partner violence for the sake of family completeness and their children (Loke et al., 2012).

While the communal values of sharing, mutual aid, caring for others, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, and social harmony remain fundamental and mostly privileged cultural value in the Ghanaian society, discursive accounts of participants in the current study revealed that the same cannot be said of marital conflicts in Ghana. There is a culturally assumed ethos in Ghana that suggests that marital conflicts, including serious abuse, should not be brought to public scrutiny. The negative implication is that many women tolerate and remain in abusive relationships and do not complain publicly about their ordeals because of the culturally given

'privatization' of spousal/marital conflicts in the Ghanaian society. As Eckstein (2009) points out, victims of IPV internalize relational norms that judge them under the assumption that they should remain silent about their ordeal and stay in their relationship.

The view of marital issues as belonging to the private sphere of partners was mainly responsible for why the marital rape clause in the Domestic Violence Bill (passed into law in 2007, DV Act 732) was strongly rejected by both men and women in Ghana (Hodžić, 2009; Stafford, 2008). Prior to the passage of the bill, prominent personalities in Ghana, including presidential candidates and legal luminaries strongly held the view that the marital rape clause was a foreign imposition and an unnecessary intrusion into the privacy of married couples (Ansa-Ansare, 2003). For instance, Dr. Edward Mahama, a medical practitioner and the then presidential candidate of the Peoples' National Convention (PNC) party is quoted to have said that: "if we talk about marital rape, it means we are going *into the bedroom, and we have no right to go there … you cannot legislate on such issues*" (Stafford, 2008, p. 63, emphasis added). Within the wider polemics, cultural sovereignty prevailed over legal activism and the marital rape clause was eventually expunged from the drafted DV bill. The culture of 'private sphere' in marriage is so rooted in the Ghanaian social fabric that even when abuse cases are reported to appropriate authorities, details of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, become sketchy and inaccessible to law enforcement agencies (Adjei, 2012). This is consistent with other studies that indicate that some abused women consider family violence as a private matter and feel ashamed to talk about it in public (Loke et al., 2012).

The private sphere of marriage may include the extended family, the preferred avenue for addressing marital conflicts rather than discussing them with "strangers" or on the public arena of the courts or the police. The cultural framing of marital abuse as belonging to the private sphere of individuals appears to contrast the communal value of sharing and solidarity and the view that marriage in Ghana is a group affair. Theoretically, it may also be at odds with the depersonalized view of the self—communal ontology of personhood—where the self shifts from personal (private) to the collective (the extended family). However, in practice, the private sphere expressed by participants in the study may not necessarily preclude the family. The family, the established template against which the individual derives and articulates a personal identity, may be implicit in the *privacy positioning* of participants. In many instances, victims may prefer reporting spousal violence to the immediate family members because of the belief that private disputes involving a husband and a wife is best adjudicated by traditional authorities rather than the formal civil courts. In other words, discourses of *privacy* could also mean that marital conflicts belong to the parties involved in the marriage as well as their respective extended families. This is consistent with the view that

marriage in Ghana is a group affair; it does not involve individuals but families. Understood this way, the family is thus positioned in the discourses of victims as an extension of the individual self, which specifies values, goals, and norms of marital life and guides the individual's interface with the surrounding world. The social cost of discussing marital conflicts in public in Ghana seems very high in the society.

Implications for research and practice

Although *individualized* and victim-based intervention strategies, such as psychotherapy and social counseling at the DOVVSU and social welfare departments are important, such counseling services should involve members of the extended families of both victims and perpetrators. The DOVVSU department should work collectively with families, religious and traditional leaders to develop useful guidelines on how to help victims of IPV in Ghana. Healthcare professionals in Ghana should also be trained and encouraged to identify and help victims of IPV. There is also a need for sustained, preventive-focused, and community-based education that empowers churches, mosques, educators, and opinion leaders to openly and expressly condemn spousal violence and help foster an awareness of its destructive consequences on individuals, families, and society.

Given the evidence for battered women's emphasis on externality of self-positioning, where the extended family is highlighted over and above the individual self and choices, future research on IPV should extend its focus on battered women's personal agentive actions to include ways in which socio-cultural conditions and structural forces constrain victims of IPV from fleeing abuse. For example, instead of asking why victims stay in abusive relationships, implying victims' failure to act on their own behalf, future studies should rather ask what cultural and familial factors constrain victims from leaving violent relationships particularly in interdependent societies. Future studies could also extend its focus to include the views of non-victims and non-perpetrators to have a more holistic picture of the contextual factors that influence stay/leave decisions of battered women in Ghana.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the decision to stay in or leave an abusive marital relationship in Ghana appears to be socioculturally and structurally grounded. The concern for what social others might say or think of divorced women lead individual victims to the most basic question: what will the choice of my action (ending the relationship) mean to my identity as a woman in Ghana (public self-image) and my family? The social pain that results from divorce stigmatization seems to be a staggering burden

confronting victims of spousal abuse in the Ghanaian community and may serve as a social barrier to relationship termination. Also, post-divorce remarriage opportunities and child maintenance, and the cultural framing of marital conflicts as belonging to the private sphere have powerful influence on battered women's sense of selves and their action potentials. To understand and explain the highly complex nature of spousal violence, we must seek the origin of battered women's entrapment in abusive marital relationships in the external conditions of life, and in the sociocultural and structural forms of human existence.

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